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ABSTRACT

This report, fourth in a series of eight, highlights the views of Californians about policies local communities and the state can establish to reduce the potential for alcohol problems among young people. In the California Center for Health Improvement (CCHI) "Children and Youth Survey," 51% of the adults surveyed said that they were very worried about teen substance abuse, including the abuse of alcohol. When asked about specific policy measures intended to reduce alcohol problems among young people, 78% of the adults believe that alcoholic beverage promotions to minors should be prohibited. Such promotions include advertising paraphernalia. Adults (77%) also agree that billboard advertising should be restricted in residential areas and near schools. Californians also overwhelmingly support expanding local government authority to include the power to suspend or revoke a liquor store's license if the store repeatedly sells alcohol to minors. Eighty-nine percent of adults (and 96% of registered voters) expressed agreement with this policy. A concrete measure of the public's concern that alcohol and drug problems pose a serious threat to the health and safety of young people is provided by the public's expressed willingness to pay more in taxes to address these problems. Seventy-five percent of adults surveyed said they would be somewhat willing to pay more in taxes to make better services available through substance abuse programs. Furthermore, Californians expressed high levels of support for increases in the state beer excise tax to fund services for children and families. Policy recommendations are made based on these survey findings. (Contains 6 tables and 18 references.)(SLD)

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ED 426 123

Preventing Alcohol Problems Among Young People: Californians Support Key Public Policies.

Growing Up Well
Focus on Prevention

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Preventing Alcohol Problems Among Young People: Californians Support Key Public Policies

By James F. Mosher, J.D.

Alcohol use among young people is a serious public health problem facing California communities. Yet, prevention, treatment and law enforcement programs designed to reduce youth alcohol problems have shown only limited effects. These programs have often been undermined by the mixed messages many young people receive in their communities about alcohol, its role in society and in coming of age, and its potential risk to health and safety.

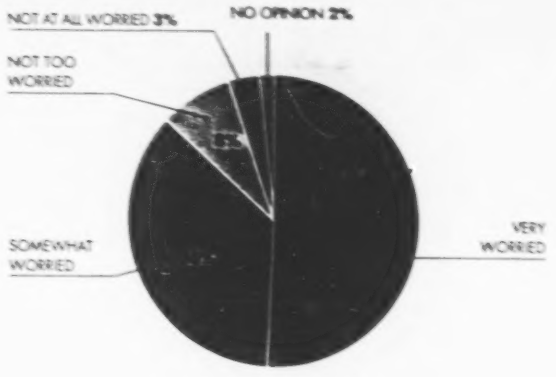
Alcohol and Other Drug Use — A Continuing Problem Among Young People

Californians view alcohol and other drug use among teens as one of the most serious threats facing California children and youth. In the California Center for Health Improvement's (CCHI) *Children and Youth Survey*, 51 percent of California adults surveyed said they are very worried about teen substance abuse, and another 36 percent are somewhat worried (table 1).

TABLE 1

Californians Worried About Substance Abuse Among Teens

How worried are you about... substance abuse among teens... in regard to the children and youth who live in your community?



November 1997.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

April is Alcohol Awareness Month. During this month, health professionals, alcohol prevention specialists and concerned people from all walks of life are calling attention to the devastating effects alcohol can have on individuals, families and communities. This fourth of eight reports in the *Growing Up Well* series highlights the views of California adults about policies local communities and the state can establish to reduce the potential for alcohol problems among young people. These policies offer an approach to prevention which addresses alcohol problems as community problems with community-based solutions. For additional policy ideas to reduce alcohol problems, see CCHI's new publication, *Policy MATTERS*, available in print and at CCHI's new website, http://www.policymatters.org.

Parents, and low-income parents in particular, reported an even higher degree of concern. Seventy-five percent of parents with annual household incomes of less than $20,000 reported being very worried about the problem (1). This level of concern may reflect the risks many low-income young people face, such as the ready availability of alcohol and other drugs, high rates of violence associated with drug use and the high concentration of alcohol outlets in low-income neighborhoods.

Rates of heavy drinking among California seventh, ninth and eleventh graders have been increasing since 1991, putting California teenagers at high risk for alcohol problems. In a 1995–96 survey sponsored by several agencies within the state, over 8 percent of seventh graders, over 17 percent of ninth graders, and nearly 22 percent of eleventh graders said they had had five or more drinks at least two times in the past two weeks (table 2, page 2). In this same survey, over 37 percent of eleventh graders reported drinking and driving or being in a car

with a drinking driver at some point during their lifetime. More than 10 percent reported six or more such incidents. At the same time, approximately 20 percent of ninth graders and 27 percent of eleventh graders reported high-risk drug use, which is defined as any cocaine or crack use in the last six months, frequent poly-drug use, regular marijuana use or a pattern of use of numerous other illegal drugs besides cocaine or marijuana (2).

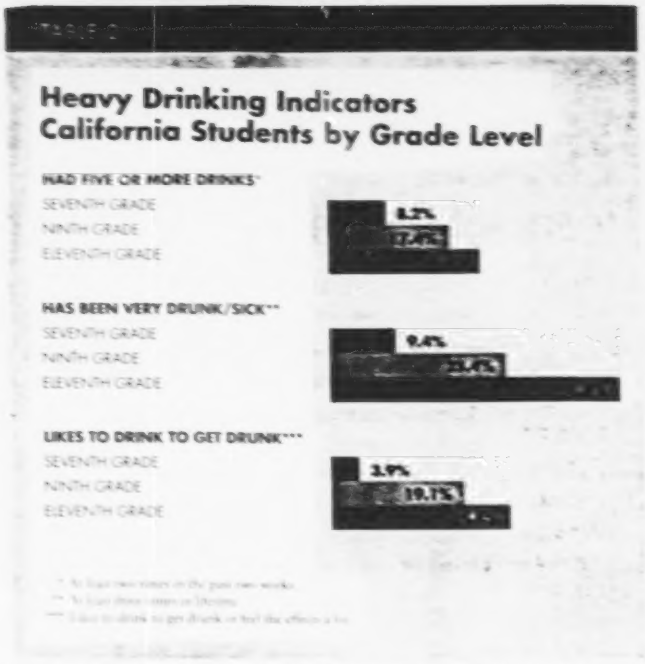
Environmental Strategies to Prevent Alcohol Problems Among Young People — An Underutilized Approach

Like the public, prevention specialists agree that alcohol and other drug use pose one of the most serious threats to the health and safety of young people. With respect to alcohol in particular, these specialists also agree that past efforts to address alcohol problems among young people have had limited impact. Traditional programs have focused on educating young people about the risks of alcohol and persuading them through deterrence, mass media, refusal skills, and other strategies to reduce or eliminate alcohol use, particularly in high-risk situations. These *individual-based strategies*, which have focused on individual behaviors, typically have not incorporated broader, community-based strategies. The absence of this connection to the broader community has limited opportunities for individual-based strategies to be successful. The messages young people have received through individual strategies have often been challenged and undermined by messages from the broader social environment, which frequently encourage youthful experimentation with alcohol or other substances and downplay its role in a variety of societal problems.

An *environmental approach* to preventing alcohol problems is gaining growing recognition because it responds to the limitations of traditional, individual-based programs. Environmentally-based prevention programs recognize that youth alcohol problems are the result of a complex web of factors, including:

- family drinking histories;
- peer pressure;
- community norms and practices;
- alcohol availability;
- price;
- industry marketing practices; and
- underlying social, political, economic and cultural variables.

Researchers and practitioners describe this multiplicity of causal factors as the *alcohol environment* — and are increasingly promoting an approach to prevention that tackles alcohol problems as community problems with community-based solutions, rather than a matter primarily of individual behavior (3). The



Source: Skager, R. and Austin, G., *Sixth Biennial California Student Substance Use Survey, Grades 7, 9, 11, 1995–96.* San Francisco: Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development, 1996.

major focus is on the community, which establishes the norms and expectations regarding alcohol use for community members and which have an enormous impact on young people's decisions. Each community shapes its own alcohol environment based on its particular circumstances and concerns.

An environmental approach to preventing alcohol problems asks questions such as: What role does alcohol play in the community? How is alcohol integrated into community events? What messages do young people receive about alcohol when they leave school, from advertising, the mass media, at social events, in retail outlets and at home? Where do young people drink, who provides it for them and how expensive is it?

Environmental prevention strategies seek to change community norms and practices concerning alcohol, and the *emphasis of change is through policy reform.* Policies can be either formal or informal and address the rules which govern interactions among community members. Policies can be grouped into four categories, which parallel the marketing strategies businesses use to develop a social environment which is conducive to the sale of their products (3, 4). These four policy categories are:

- *Product:* What is the design of a product, how is it packaged, what alcohol content does it have? For example, many new alcohol products have sweet tastes and a relatively high alcohol content. They appear to be designed specifically for the youth market. Examples include alcopops (juice-based

drinks originating in England), alcohol slushes, and drinks made with fruit juices and grain alcohol (5). To what extent are these products available in the community?

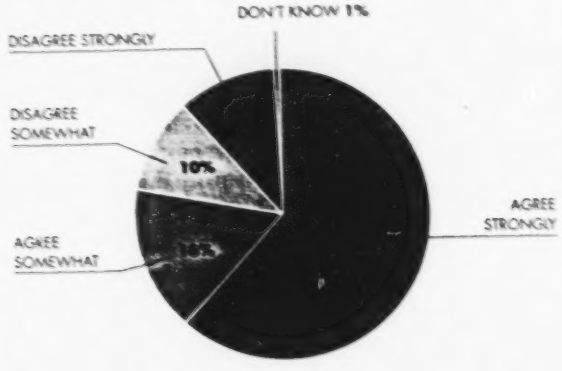
- *Promotion:* How is the product advertised and promoted? Is alcohol promoted at community events? Are youthful themes and images used? To what extent are counter-messages which show the consequences of alcohol abuse present? What restrictions does the community have on alcohol industry marketing practices?
- *Place:* Where is alcohol sold and consumed and what sales practices are used? How many alcohol outlets are there in a community, what types and at what locations? To what extent is alcohol available at community events? Are high-risk practices permitted (such as drinking games)? How do young people gain access to alcohol?
- *Price:* How expensive are alcohol products compared to other consumer goods? What are the taxes on alcohol products and how have they changed over time? Are happy hours and other discount sales practices (such as keg sales) permitted?

Recent research has demonstrated that alcohol policy reforms are an effective means for reducing alcohol problems, particularly among young people (6). For example, econometric studies have shown that alcohol is price-sensitive, particularly for young people. Relatively modest increases in alcohol taxes will result in a significant drop in youth alcohol use and drinking driver crash rates (7). Reducing the number of alcohol outlets in low-income communities is associated with a significant reduction in youth violence (8). Young people who have a high exposure to alcohol advertising report an increased intention to drink when they are older and report more positive associations with alcohol use (9).

TABLE 3

Three Out of Four Agree — Alcoholic Beverage Promotions to Minors Should Be Prohibited

The sale and distribution of items that promote alcoholic beverages, such as prizes and clothing, should be prohibited to children and teens.



Source: *Children and Youth Survey*, The Field Institute, October–November 1997.

Reducing Alcohol's Appeal and Availability To Young People — Californians Support Key Public Policies

CCHI's *Children and Youth Survey* asked California adults to consider three specific policy measures intended to reduce alcohol problems among young people. Survey results are striking: Californians overwhelmingly support these changes in community environments. The findings parallel support shown for a variety of alcohol policies both in California and nationwide.

Prohibit Sale and Distribution Of Promotional Items to Children and Teens

Seventy-eight percent of adults surveyed said they believe alcoholic beverage promotions to minors should be prohibited. Nearly two-thirds, 62 percent, strongly agree (table 3). These promotions include prizes at county

Neighborhood Residents Unite to Address Alcohol And Drug Abuse

Alcohol and drug abuse are undermining community health in two Santa Rosa neighborhoods, say residents. This abuse is contributing to neighborhood violence, crime, and economic instability.

The identification of alcohol and drug abuse as top community concerns in Santa Rosa was obtained through resident surveys, interviews and community meetings sponsored by the Sonoma County Community Health Partnership, a community coalition of diverse community members and nonprofit agencies, schools, medical professionals and government representatives in the Santa Rosa area. The Partnership is funded by The California Wellness Foundation as a part of its Health Improvement Initiative.

Following up on the community's priority, the Partnership is working with neighborhood residents to identify and implement policies and programs residents believe will reduce alcohol and drug problems in their neighborhoods. Programs and services underway include health education classes and forums, community newspapers and mentoring programs for young people. Through these and other efforts, neighborhood residents are taking steps to improve the health of their community.

For more information, contact 707 525 6512

fairs, clothing, key chains, stuffed animals and other paraphernalia. California currently prohibits such promotions only if the California Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control (ABC Department) can establish that the distributor intends to increase drinking among the young people who receive the promotions (10). The ABC Department has never enforced this law because of the difficulty in establishing the subjective intent of the distributor. As a result, young people routinely receive alcohol promotions, often at community events such as county fairs and ethnic celebrations.

Community action at the Marin County Fair provides one example of an environmental prevention strategy. Community members discovered that game booths at the fair were distributing alcohol advertising paraphernalia to children. They formed a coalition in 1995, documented this practice and approached the local decision-makers responsible for overseeing fair activities. The coalition was at first rebuffed, but it persisted and eventually succeeded in eliminating the prizes, generating increased awareness among community leaders and the public generally of the use of advertising techniques to target young people.

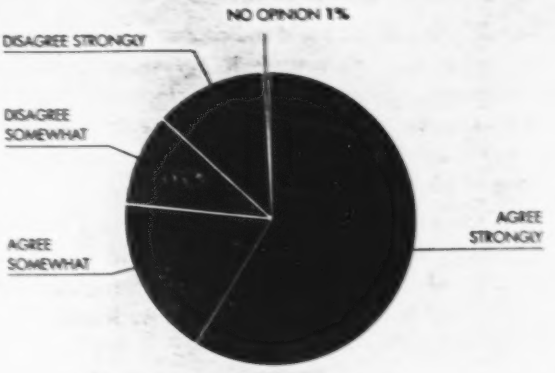
Several attempts have been made to strengthen state law regarding distribution of promotional items. In particular, efforts have been made to eliminate the requirement that the ABC Department prove the distributor's intent to increase youthful drinking before action can be taken to prohibit alcohol promotional items. In a parallel effort, alcohol policy advocates have called on the alcohol industry to refrain from using cartoon characters and Halloween images in its advertising because of the obvious appeal to children.

Public opinion surveys have shown overwhelming support for restricting alcohol advertising which appeals to young people. One national survey conducted in 1997 found that 78 percent of respondents supported a policy which would restrict alcohol advertising on television and radio programs when 25 percent or more of the audience are underage. The survey found similar public support for mandated health and safety messages on liquor advertisements and for a policy which would prohibit the use of cartoon characters and other images attractive to children (11). A second survey conducted in 1997 asked California adults whether they believe the beer industry targets teenagers in advertising and marketing. Two-thirds of respondents, 64 percent, said yes; 27 percent said no (12). CCHI's *Children and Youth Survey* asked California adults whether they believe beer companies target their products to minors. Fifty-six percent said yes; 43 percent said no (1). Despite the public sentiment expressed in these surveys, the alcohol industry has failed to implement voluntary reforms to marketing practices, and has successfully lobbied against proposals which would limit marketing practices.

TABLE 4

Majority Supports Local Laws Prohibiting Billboard Advertising of Alcohol Near Schools and in Residential Areas

Local laws should be passed which prohibit billboard advertising of alcoholic beverages in residential neighborhoods and near schools.



Source: *Children and Youth Survey*, The Field Institute, October–November 1997.

Restrict Billboard Advertising in Residential Areas and Near Schools

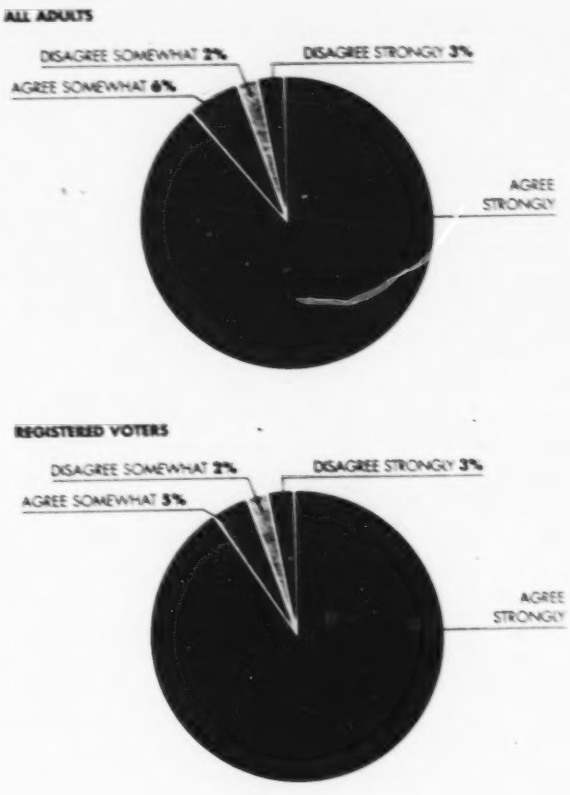
Many California communities are considering local ordinances which would prohibit alcohol advertising on billboards near schools or residential areas. Seventy-seven percent of adults responding to CCHI's *Children and Youth Survey* said they support these billboard restrictions; 59 percent expressed strong support (table 4). Registered voters expressed the same level of support as California adults, and parents expressed the highest level of support. Eighty-three percent supported such local ordinances; 67 percent strongly supported them (1).

Alcohol advertising on billboards is of particular concern because of its intrusive nature — the advertising cannot be ignored or "turned off." Parents cannot protect their children from the messages. Billboards, particularly those advertising alcohol and tobacco, are also much more likely to be present in low-income communities, often permeating residential neighborhoods. One study estimated that children in one low-income, Latino community walked by up to 64 alcohol advertisements on a one-way trip to school (13). Those involved in grassroots reform efforts view this high concentration of alcohol and tobacco billboards as a form of community blight. They question the advertising and regulatory policies which strictly limit the placement of billboards in middle and upper income areas but allow for a high concentration of billboards in low-income areas.

TABLE 5

Widespread Support — Both Local and State Governments Should be Able to Suspend Licenses of Liquor Stores Selling Alcohol to Minors

Local governments, as well as state governments, should have the authority to suspend or revoke the license of a liquor store that repeatedly sells alcoholic beverages to minors.



Source: *Children and Youth Survey*, The Field Institute, October–November 1997.

Several California communities are taking action to restrict alcohol and tobacco billboards. Coalitions in Oakland, Compton and Los Angeles County have convinced their local governing bodies to enact ordinances that restrict alcohol and tobacco billboards in areas where children are likely to be present. The cities of San Jose and Los Angeles are considering similar legislation. This represents a national trend. At least 30 cities, including Baltimore and Chicago, have either passed or are considering legislation to restrict alcohol and tobacco billboards.

Give Local Governments Power to Suspend and Revoke Liquor Store Licenses

Californians also overwhelmingly support expanding local government authority to include the power to suspend or revoke a liquor store's license if the store repeatedly sells alcoholic beverages to minors. Eighty-nine percent of adults and 91 percent of registered voters surveyed expressed strong agreement with this policy measure. An additional six percent of California adults and five percent of registered voters surveyed expressed some agreement (table 5).

Current state law does not permit local authority. The state ABC Department has the *exclusive power* to issue, suspend, and revoke liquor licenses. The complex process does not encourage or seriously consider community input. Moreover, disciplinary actions require multiple hearings and extensive evidence of violations; there are numerous opportunities for appeal of department decisions; a variety of legal tactics are used to delay or reverse adverse decisions; and the process is expensive and time-consuming. Community groups and local governments have no direct role in the disciplinary process, which occurs at legal hearings away from the site of violations.

While the ABC Department has exclusive authority to revoke or suspend liquor licenses, its ability to effectively carry out its responsibilities is limited by the lack of enforcement personnel. The department currently has 198 enforcement agents assigned to approximately 68,000 licensees, a ratio of one enforcement officer for every 343 outlets (14). As department enforcement capacity has eroded, enforcement responsibilities have increasingly been left to local officials. Yet, the role of local governments is severely restricted because the ABC Department retains exclusive authority to conduct disciplinary actions against a business' state liquor license.

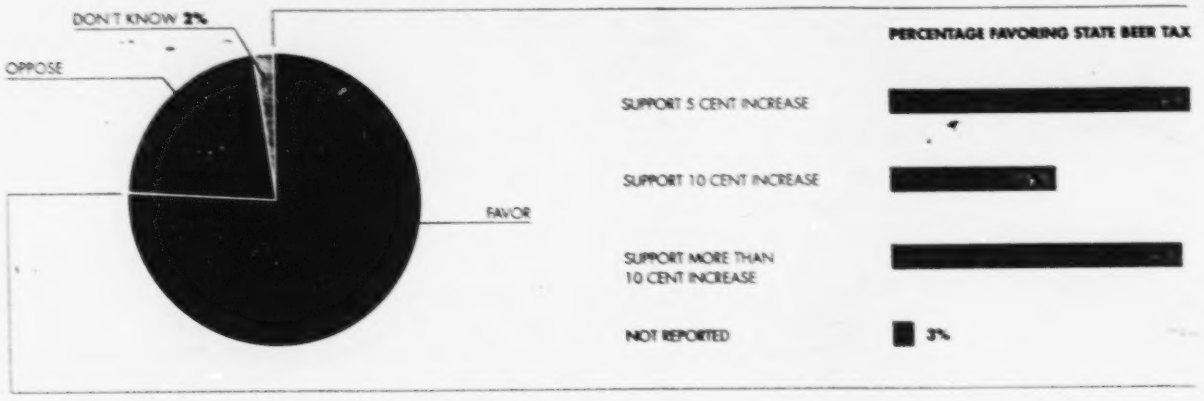
To date, the state has failed to expand local control of sales-to-minors laws despite these problems in enforcement and despite overwhelming public support for action. Yet, it is important for policy-makers to recognize that local control is a linchpin of the environmental approach to prevention because of its emphasis on community norms and practices. Reforming state laws that restrict local authority is therefore required to promote this prevention paradigm.

Strict enforcement of the law prohibiting sales to minors is a high priority in California communities. The Teen Alcohol Prevention Project (TAPP), for example, focused on this issue between 1994 and 1997 in Sonoma, Napa, Mendocino and Lake Counties. TAPP brought together a broad coalition of parents, prevention and treatment workers, law enforcement officials and other community members to develop an environmental approach to reducing teen drinking problems. The project succeeded in making sales-to-minors laws a higher priority at the local level and reduced the perceived ease of

TABLE 6

Three in Four Voters Favor Increasing State Beer Tax if Revenues Are Used to Fund Services for Children and Families

Generally speaking, would you favor or oppose increasing the state tax on beer if the additional revenue was used to fund more services for children and families? If yes... by another 5 cents, 10 cents, or by more than 10 cents per bottle?



Source: *Children and Youth Survey*, The Field Institute, October–November 1997.

alcohol access among young people. Public support and awareness also increased significantly. An evaluation of the project however, found it was hampered by the ineffectiveness of the ABC Department, which suffered major budget cuts during the project period, conducted only sporadic enforcement actions, and did not vigorously prosecute violations brought to its attention by local law enforcement (15).

Californians Are Willing to Pay for More Substance Abuse Programs

A concrete measure of the public's concern that alcohol and drug problems pose a serious threat to the health and safety of young people is provided by the public's expressed willingness to pay more in taxes to address these problems. CCHI's *Children and Youth Survey* asked California adults whether they would be willing to pay more in taxes to make substance abuse prevention and treatment programs to address alcohol, illegal drug and tobacco use more available for the children and families in their communities. Seventy-five percent of adults surveyed and 73 percent of registered voters surveyed said they are somewhat to very willing to pay more in taxes to make these services available (1).

Public Voices Broad-Based Support for Beer Tax

Registered voters surveyed by CCHI's *Children and Youth Survey* also expressed high levels of support for increases in the state beer excise tax if the revenues are used to fund services for children and families. Beer is currently taxed at the rate of 1.4 cents per 12-ounce container. Seventy-six percent of registered voters said they supported an increase in this tax of at least 5 cents per 12-ounce container. Forty-four percent supported an increase of at least 10 cents per container and 28 percent supported an increase of more than 10 cents per container (table 6).

Support for increasing the beer tax in California is broad-based. Eighty percent of Democrats and 68 percent of Republicans said they favor a tax increase as did 81 percent of other registered voters. Those earning less than $50,000 reported slightly higher rates of support than higher income earners, 78 percent versus 74 percent (1).

The level of public support for beer taxes has remained steady and increased slightly over the last ten years. A 1989 survey conducted for the Trauma Foundation in connection with a statewide alcohol tax initiative found 73 percent of registered voters supported a 5 cents per drink alcohol tax with funding dedicated to law enforcement, emergency trauma care and public education (16). Support was highest for funding options involving alcohol prevention and treatment programs, particularly those targeting young people. A May, 1997 survey conducted by EDK Associates found a 75 percent positive response to a similar 5 cents per drink proposal. EDK found that nearly four in five non-drinkers, 79 percent, expressed

strong support for the tax proposal and, by nearly a two-to-one margin, 62 percent of beer drinkers themselves said they are willing to pay an increased tax (12).

Broad public support for increasing taxes on alcohol, such as beer, runs counter to the widely held view that the public is unwilling to raise taxes. However, several factors appear to contribute to this phenomenon:

- The public is very concerned about alcohol problems in society, particularly among young people who are the most sensitive to the price of products;
- The public supports increased funding for programs to improve the conditions of young people, provided the public can be sure that the taxes being collected go for the specific purpose rather than into the general fund;
- Beer prices have dropped steadily over the last thirty years. Beer is now price competitive with popular nonalcoholic beverages, including soft drinks, in part because the level of beer excise taxes has not kept pace with inflation; and
- A beer tax would be paid primarily by the heaviest drinkers. According to recent national surveys, 10 percent of the drinkers (comprising approximately seven percent of the population) consume more than 60 percent of the alcohol (17).

Beyond its usefulness as an approach for raising funds to support programs for children and youth, increasing taxes on alcohol products, such as beer, also represents a key policy in an environmental approach to prevention. Increasing the price of beer will affect demand for the product. Research suggests that increasing alcohol taxes is perhaps the most powerful environmental prevention strategy (6, 7). Beer taxes are particularly important because beer is the beverage of choice among young people (18).

Policy Recommendations

Research and CCHI's *Children and Youth Survey* point to the need for major changes in public policies if significant progress in reducing alcohol and other drug problems young people face is to be achieved. Policy-makers, stakeholders in the alcohol and drug abuse prevention fields, and the public should give strong consideration to five important policies designed to reduce alcohol problems among young people:

Develop and expand environmental strategies at the state, local and community levels to prevent alcohol and other drug problems. **State, local and community policies should refocus** prevention programs to incorporate an environmental perspective that emphasizes the role of community norms and practices. This should be a top priority in California because of the high levels of alcohol and other drug use reported among today's young people, the serious social and health problems such use poses, and the limited success shown by traditional individual-based prevention strategies.

Discontinue alcohol promotions and marketing practices which target young people. Californians believe that marketing which incorporates giving or selling alcohol promotions, such as prizes and clothing, to those under the drinking age should be prohibited. As a first effort, policy-makers, public health professionals and community members should seek voluntary action by the alcohol, media and advertising industries to refrain from using these types of programs. As a part of this effort, the use of cartoon characters, Halloween images, and other images and messages attractive to young people should be addressed; and advertising and promotional practices at community events such as county fairs should be examined. However, in the absence of voluntary action, local and state task forces should be convened to consider alternative approaches.

Support efforts by low-income residents to prohibit alcohol and tobacco billboards in residential neighborhoods and near schools. The concentration of billboards in low-income areas contributes to neighborhood blight and represents one of the most intrusive forms of advertising. A large number of children are exposed to promotional messages even though children cannot legally purchase the products being advertised. Community grassroots efforts to restrict billboard advertising need to be supported through research, training and technical assistance services.

Prevention of Alcohol And Drug Use Through Mentoring

Bobbie was born into a working poor family with a long history of alcohol and drug abuse. From an early age, she was abused by her father and exposed to his ongoing alcohol and drug abuse. By age eight, she was inactive, withdrawn and doing poorly in school. Her potential for abusing alcohol and drugs and getting into trouble was high.

Ultimately, Bobbie's mom took Bobbie and her little sister away from their father, and it became clear Bobbie needed more support and guidance. When a school counselor recommended Bobbie get involved in a mentoring program, her mom acted right away. Being matched with a mentor from the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program was a turning point. Today Bobbie is an active 11 year old making new friendships, learning karate and doing better in school.

Seventeen mentoring programs make up the Mendocino Community Health Partnership's Mentoring Alliance, which is one feature of a broad strategy to promote youth development. By helping young people benefit from adult mentoring relationships, the Alliance is helping them avoid alcohol and drug use, delinquency and other risks to their health. The Partnership and the Mentoring Alliance are funded by The California Wellness Foundation as a part of its Health Improvement Initiative.

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Increase local authority to regulate alcohol availability and alcohol marketing, particularly regarding the enforcement of laws prohibiting furnishing alcohol to minors. An environmental approach to prevention can only work if local communities have authority to take action. State laws which prohibit or preempt local control are antithetical to environmental strategies. A comprehensive plan for a state/local partnership in regulating alcohol availability and marketing, with a focus on reducing youth access and advertising appeal, is required. There is nearly unqualified public support for such a policy reform.

Consistent with voter support, increase alcohol taxes as both a means for funding youth and family programs in the state and as a strategy for reducing alcohol problems among young people. High voter willingness to increase beer taxes crosses ideological and demographic lines. Policy-makers should consider the level of support Californians show for increasing alcohol taxes and clearly define the role increased taxation is to play in an overall environmental strategy to reduce alcohol and other drug problems among young people in California.

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